~~BEGINNING~~ THIS SUNDAY WE BEGIN THE CELEBRATION OF THE LENTEN SEASON, COMMORATING THE LAST DAYS OF OUR LORD'S MINISTRY ON EARTH, HIS ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM AND HIS DEATH. IT IS A PERIOD OF BOTH PREPARATION AND ANTICIPATION--WE ~~XXXXX~~ ARE TO PREPARE OURSELVES SPIRITUALLY FOR THE COMMEMORATION OF THE DRAMA THAT OCCURED IN JERUSALEM AND ON CALVARY, AND OF COURSE WE ANTICIPATE THE GLORIOUS NEWS OF EASTER MORNING. THE EVENT THAT LENT POINTS TO IS WITHOUT A DOUBT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT AND IMPORTANT SINGLE HAPPENING IN THE HISTORY OF MAN KIND. EVEN NON CHRISTIANS REALIZE THAT THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE CHRIST HAVE PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED HISTORY AND ESPECIALLY WESTERN CIVILIZATION--AND AS CHRISTIANS WE LOOK TO THOSE EVENTS AS THE MOST SACRED INSTANCES OF ALL time ~~IN HISTORY~~ THE INSTANCES WHEN MAN HAS BEEN OFFERED ~~MUCH~~ THE UNDESERVED LOVE OF GOD AND ~~FORGIV-~~ ~~NESS~~. THE GIFT OF EVERLASTING LIFE

LENT IS AN IMPORTANT AND SERIOUS OCCASION BUT LIKE ALL THE REST OF CHRISTIANITIES' SACRED CELEBRATIONS ITS MEANING HAS BEEN HIDDEN BY A BARRAGE OF COMMERCIALISM. JUST AS CHRISTMAS HAS BECOME THE VICTIM OF ADVERTISING AND MASS PERSUASION TO SPEND MORE MONEY SO EASTER AND THE LENTEN SEASON PROVIDE THE MADISON AVENUE MEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEASH ON US ANOTHER HIGH POWERED ATTACK. THAT JESUS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD WAS CRUCIFIED AND ROSE AGAIN HAS BECOME INSIGNIFICANT BESIDE NEW HATS, FLOWERS, THE EASTER PARADE AND OF COURSE THE EASTER BUNNY. BUT OUT OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH ITSELF HAS COME A CUSTOM THAT NOW TOO, IN THE MAJORITY OF CASES ONLY DETRACTS FROM THE HOLINESS

OF THE SEASON- ~~AND~~ THAT IS THE CUSTOM OF GIVING UP SOMETHING FOR LENT. IT WAS THOUGHT THAT BY MAKING A TRUE SACRIFICE A PERSON MIGHT EXPERIENCE, IN PART, THE SUFFERING OF OUR LORD. IT WAS AND IS THOUGHT BY THE ROMAN CATHOLICS THAT DEPRIVING ONESELF OF SOMETHING PLEASES GOD AND ENLARGES ONES CHANCE OF A SPEEDY ENTRY INTO HEAVEN. IN RECENT YERRS SOME PROTESTANT CHURCHES HAVE ENCOURAGED THEIR MEMBERS TO DO WITHOUT ONE MEAL A DAY AND TO GIVE THE MONEY SAVED THEREIN TO SOME CHARITY. BUT FOR THE MOST PART THE LENTEN SACRIFICE HAS BECOME THE MEANS FOR LOSING WEIGHT, OR FOR QUITTING SMOKING OR FOR SOME OTHER TRIVIAL ENDEAVOR. THAT THIS PRACTICE IS SPIRITUALLY HELPFUL IS QUESTIONABLE INDEED. IF THESE THINGS ARE NECESSARY AND DESIRABLE, FINE, BUT LET'S NOT FURTHER BURY THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LENT WITH OUR PERSONAL WHIMS.

WE DO WELL TO SPEND THE LENTEN SEASON IN SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION AND RENEWAL. SHARING IN OUR WORSHIP AND DAILY LIVES THE TENSE DRAMA THAT OCCURED AS JESUS NEARED HIS DEATH; BRINGING INTO TIMELY FOCUS THE UNSPEAKABLE GIFT; THE FACT THAT GOD HIMSELF HAS BORN THE PUNISHMENT FOR OUR JISDEEDS, THAT WE HAVE BEEN SAVED AND OFFERED ETERNAL LIFE. THIS TASK IS QUITE ENOUGH TO FULFILL IN LENT.

AND SO ON THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT I HAVE DECIDED TO DISCUSS THE STORY OF A MAN, WHO LIKE US, in so many ways WANTED TO EARN HIS WAY INTO GOD'S GRACE AND DISCOVERED THAT HE COULD NOT. IT WAS AN IMPOSSIBILITY.

A VERY WEALTHY YOUNG MAN HAD APPROACHED JESUS TO ASK WHAT HE MUST DO TO BE SAVED. HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE SANHEDRIN, THE HIGHEST COURT IN THE JEWISH NATION, AND BEING A MEMBER OF THAT BODY MEANT THAT ONE WAS VERY DEVOUT, OBEYING THE JEWISH LAW TO PERFECTION. BESIDES THIS HE MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE AN INDEPENDENT AND COURAGEOUS PERSON TO HAVE APPROACHED JESUS, A PEASANT FROM NAZARETH, AND ASK HIM WHAT HE MUST DO. THE MAN HAD FULFILLED THE LAW OF MOSES COMPLETELY BUT YET FELT SOMEWHAT UNEASY. TO HIS QUESTION JESUS'S REPLY WAS BLUNT AND TO THE POINT--"GO, AND SELL ALL YOU HAVE AND GIVE TO THE POOR." (CONSIDER THAT REPLY FOR A MINUTE, ITS HARSHNESS IS BEWILDERING. IF THAT REPLY CAME TO YOU COULD YOU COMPLY WITH IT--? COULD YOU SELL EVERYTHING YOU HAVE, EVERY WORDLY POSSESSION--I DON'T KNOW/ BUT I DO KNOW ? IF THIS COMMAND IS THE PREREQUISITE TO ETERNAL LIFE, WE AND THE MILLIONS BEFORE US WOULD BE IN A SORRY PLIGHT.

BUT JESUS DID NOT STOP THERE CLOSING THE DOOR FOREVER ON PEOPLE WITH ANY MATERIAL POSSESSIONS. HE CONTINUED BY SAYING THAT IT WAS EASIER FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE THAN FOR A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. THERE HAS BEEN MUCH SPECULATION REGARDING THIS STRANGE METAPHOR AND SCHOLARS HAVE COME UP WITH TWO ALTERNATIVES. THE ARAMAIC WORD FOR CAMEL IS VERY SIMILAR TO THE WORD ROPE, THUSLY JESUS

COULD HAVE BEEN SAYING IT IS EASIER TO THREAD A ROPE THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE.

ON THE OTHER HAND ARCHEOLOGISTS HAVE DISCOVERED THAT THERE WAS A SMALL OPENING

IN THE OLD WALL OF JERUSALEM., THROUGH WHICH CAMELS COULD MAKE AN ENTRANCE AFTER THE

CITY GATES HAD BEEN CLOSED FOR THE NIGHT. TO DO SO, HOWEVER, ENTAILED QUITE A

STRUGGLE, IT MEANT FORCING THE CAMEL TO BE DOWN AND PUSHING AND PULLING IT RHOUGH. THIS

INTERPRETATON OF THE METAPHOR WOULD HAVE REAL MEANING FOR JESUS LISTNERS FOR THEY

HAD PROBABLY WATCHED THIS STRUGGLE, IT COULD BE DONE BUT IT WAS QUITE A PROJECT. ~~I~~

~~MENTION THIS FOR YOUR PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THIS PASSAGE AND THE PROBLEM IN QUESTION.~~

~~HAVING HEARD THIS~~ SOME OF HIS LISTENERS OUT OF DESPAIR ASKED--IF THIS IS SO, WHO

THEN CAN BE SAVED. HERE IS THE CRUX OF THE WHOLE PASSAGE AND FOR THAT MATTER OF

THE LENTEN SEASON, JESUS ANSWERED "WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH MEN IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD".

THERE IS NOTHING MEN CAN DO TO EARN SALVATION, IT IS AN UTTER IMPOSSIBILITY-BUT THIS

DOES NOT MEAN WE ARE DOOMED BECAUSE OUR IMPOSSIBILITY IS A POSSIBILITY FOR GOD. THE

POSSIBILITY IS A REALITY IN THE GIFT OF CALVARY AND EASTER, GOD. HAS DONE WHAT IS

IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO DO ALONE.

JESUS KNEW THE RICH RULER WAS A GOOD MAN, AND HE ALSO KNEW THAT IT WAS OUT OF

THE QUESTION FOR HIM TO SELL ALL OF HIS POSSESSIONS. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT HE WANTED

TO KNOW WHAT HE HAD TO DO FURTHER TO WIN GOD'S FAVOR. HE BELIEVED THAT BY HIMSELF

HE COULD EARN HIS WAY AND TO THIS CAME THE REPLY, IN THE TERMS OF AN IMPOSSIBILITY "SIR, THERE IS NOTHING IN THE WORLD YOU CAN DO BY YOURSELF TO WIN GOD'S FAVOR."

THE FACT THAT WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR MEN IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD WOULD BE APPROPRIATE AS OUR LENTEN THEME, FOR IN IT IS THE WHOLE EASTER MESSAGE. WE CANNOT DO IT ALONE, CHRIST HAS DONE IT FOR US. (THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS WE PREPARE FOR IN LENT.)

THROUGHOUT JESUS' MINISTRY ON EARTH HE CONTINUALLY PRESENTED MEN WITH IMPOSSIBILITIES IN THE ATTEMPT TO IMPRESS UPON THEM THE FACT THAT THEY COULD NOT, BY THEIR OWN DOING, WIN SALVATION. SELL ALL YOU HAVE IS ONE OF THESS IMPOSSIBILITIES, TAKE NO THOUGHT FOR YOUR LIFE IS ANOTHER: HATE YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER IS STILL ANOTHER. THESE ARE IMPOSSIBILITIES: GIVEN FOR THAT INTENT AND PURPOSE.

FOR SOME REASON THIS IMPORTANT CHRISTIAN TRUTH TIME AND TIME AGAIN HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN AND MEN HAVE REVERTED TO A SET OF RULES AS THEIR MEANS TO SALVATION. JESUS LISTENERS MOSTLY WERE JEWS AND FOR THEM SALVATION WAS OBTAINED BY PRECISELY THOSE MEANS. THE ELABORATE JEWISH LAW WAS NOT ONLY THE GUIDE TO LIVING, BUT ALSO MORE'S PASSPORT TO HEAVEN TO PLEASE GOD ONE HAD TO ABSTAIN FROM CERTAIN FOODS, NOT ASSOCIATE WITH CERTAIN PEOPLE, PRAY A GIVEN NUMBER OF TIMES A DAY AND SO ON. AND TIME AND TIME AGAIN CAME JESUS' HARSH REPLY TO THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, THIS ENFORCED PIETY DOES NOT PLEASE GOD.

THEY HAD MASTERED THE LAW - BUT HAD MISSED THE POINT. - THE SPIRIT OF HUMILITY WAS LOST WHEN THE LAW BECAME AN END IN ITSELF

IT WAS NOT LONG AFTER JESUS DEATH HOWEVER, UNTIL CHRISTIAN MEN HAD AGAIN REVERTED TO ENFORCED PIETY AND EARNING THEIR OWN WAY TO HEAVEN. THIS TIME UNDER THE STRUCTURE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH. RULES AND REGULATIONS INCREASED HAND OVER FOOT, MEN HAD TO ~~DO~~ OBEY THE HOLDERS OF THE KEYS TO HEAVEN, ONLY THUSLY COULD THEY GAIN ADMITTANCE. AS YEARS WENT BY THIS BECAME WORSE AND WORSE UNTILTHE 16TH CENTURY REFORMATION. A DEVOUT AND DEDICATED PRIEST NAMED MARTIN LUTHER WAS BOTHERED BY THE FACT THAT HIS PARISHNERS WERE BUYING INDULGENCES AND ~~THUSLY~~ PRESUMABLY GAINING FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS. IT WAS BELIEVED THAT JESUS AND THE SAINTS HAVE ACCUMULATED FAR MORE GRACE AND GOODNESS THAN WAS NEEDED TO GET INTO HEAVEN AND THEREFORE THERE EXISTED A RESERVOIR OF LEFT OVER GOODNESS. ONE COULD GET A HOLD OF SOME BY PURCHASING AN INDULGENCE FROM A PEDDLER APPOINTED BY THE POPE HIMSELF. WHILE ST. PETER'S CATHEDRAL IN ROME WAS BEING BUILT A SPECIAL SALE WAS COMMISSIONED, ONE COULD BE PARDONED OF ALL SINS, IN THE PAST AND ALL HE WOULD COMMIT IN THE FUTURE BY BUYING ONE OF THESE INDULGENCES. IT WAS QUITE A BARGAIN. IT WAS AT THIS POINT THAT MARTIN LUTHER REALIZED THAT ANY THEORY OF EARNING OR BUYING SALVATION WAS UTTERLY FOREIGN TO THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. IT WAS THIS REALIZATION THAT RESULTED IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCH.

TODAY THIS REMAINS THE CHIEF OBSTACLE BETWEEN THE TWO BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY. TO THIS DAY CATHOLICS BELIEVE THEY CAN WIN GOD'S FAVOR AND EARN SALVATION BY PERFORMING

A MYRIAD OF OBLIGATIONS DESIGNATED BY THE CHURCH. WE, AS PROTESTANTS, BELIEVE THE EXACT OPPOSITE, THAT WE CANNOT EARN GRACE: GOD HAS GIVEN IT FREELY, WE MUST ONLY UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT.

WITHIN PROTESTANTISM, ALSO THERE IS THE CONSTANT TENDENCY TO GO BACK TO RULE BOOK PIETY. I HAVE SPOKEN TO THIS PROBLEM IN THE PAST AND I WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT ITS EXISTENCE IS ONE OF THE SORRY THINGS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY. IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT THAT WE AGAIN CONSIDER THIS TENDENCY TO EARN AT THE ONSET OF THE SEASON WHEREIN WE CELEBRATE THE REALIZATION THAT WE CANNOT WIN SALVATION THAT GOD HAS DONE IT FOR US.

CHRISTIANITY FOR MANY GROUPS AND FOR MANY INDIVIDUALS IS BOTTLED UP IN A SET OF RULES, JUST LIKE CATHOLICISM AND THE LEGALISTIC JUDAISM OF JESUS' DAY. ONE MUST NOT DRINK, SMOKE, GO TO MOVIES, PLAY BASKETBALL ON SUNDAYS AND SO ON INFINITUM. ADMITTEDLY THE WORLD WOULD BE A BETTER PLACE WITHOUT ALCHOHOL, AND THE RESULTS OF OVER CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES HAS CREATED A SOCIAL PROBLEM THAT CHRISTIANITY MUST FACE, ADMITTEDLY HUMAN HEALTH WOULD BE SAFER WITHOUT TABACCO BUT IN NO SENSE OF THE WORD CAN A MAN'S CHRISTIANITY BE MEASURED BY HIS INTAKE OF ALCHOHOL OR HIS USAGE OF TOBACCO. CHRISTIANITY THAT IS BASED ON ANY SUCH SET OF RULES IS JUST AS FOREIGN TO THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST AS THE RICH YOUNG RULERS ATTEMPT TO WIN SALVATION FOR HIMSELF. WE MUST KEEP THIS IN MIND AS WE BEGIN THE LENTEN SEASON.

WHAT MUST WE DO TO BE SAVED ASKED JESUS' LISTENERS: WHAT MUST WE DO, WE ASK. AND TO US COMES THE ANSWER, THERE IS NOTHING, NOTHING AT ALL WE CAN DO - IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO WIN IT ALONE BUT WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR MEN IS POSSIBLE FOR GOD. THIS IS THE WHOLE THRUST OF THE GOSPEL AND OF THE REFORMED FAITH, AND A SERIOUS OBSERVER OF LENT WILL KEEP IT CONSTANTLY IN MIND.

WE AS HUMAN BEINGS ARE SINNERS, THERE IS NO ESCAPING IT. MAN CAN DO NO OTHER THAN OFFEND GOD BY HIS INHERENT SELF CENTEREDNESS ~~AND~~ BELIEVING THAT GOD IS A JUST GOD WE FULLY RALIZE THAT WE ~~ALONE~~ ALONG WITH EVERY OTHER HUMAN BEING THAT EVER LIVED HAS INCURRED HIS WRATH AND DESERVE THE DUE PUNISHMENT. BUT GOD IS NOT ONLY JUST BUT LOVING AND COMPASSIONATE, AS SUCH HE DOES NOT EXERCISE THE DUE PUNISHMENT ON US BUT HAS PROVIDED ONE WHO HAS BORNE IT FOR US. THIS IS THE MEANING OF CALVARY, THIS IS WHAT WE PREPARE FOR IN LENT. WE CANNOT WIN RECONCILIATION WITH GOD, WE CANNOT BUY IT, OR EARN IT IN ANYTHING WE DO. OUR RECONCILIATION WITH GOD HAS BEEN PROVIDED ON CALVARIES CROSS. GOD HAS DONE HIMSELF WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO DO ALONE.

WHEN WE TRY TO EARN GOD'S GRACE IN ANY FASHION, WHEN WE FOOL OURSELVES INTO THINKING WE ARE WINNING DIVINE FAVOR BY GIVING UP SOMETHING FOR LENT WE DO WELL TO REMEMBER THE STORY OF THE RICH YOUNG RULER.

The ~~RICH~~ YONG RULER FOUND HIMSELF CONFRONTED WITH AN IMPOSSIBILITY WHEN HE INQUIRED HOW HE MIGHT EARN SALVATION. - THE SAME APPLIES TO US. IT IS ~~FITTING~~ FITTING THAT WE, AT THE BEGGINING OF LENT REALIZE THIS

WE ARE NOT EARNING GOD'S FAVOR BY BEING good, that we are not winning admittance to his presence By giving up something.

RATHER We can only, reverently and humbly accept (obtain) unspeakable 9:F knowing that what was done there on that hill, on that cross - we could never do alone.